

NOTES AND QUERIES

A CASE OF 'BUNDLING' IN LATE-SIXTEENTH CENTURY SHROPSHIRE

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Bundling was a pre-marital courtship practice associated with the poorer classes, in which the courting couple lay together in bed in the dark while still retaining some measure of personal dress. The practice appears to have been widespread in north-west Europe from at least the seventeenth century, although its origins are obscure. According to Stone, bundling afforded potential spouses a socially approved means of assessing their mutual and sexual compatibility, without running the risk of pregnancy and without commitment to marriage.¹

This note presents some evidence which appears to indicate the existence of this practice in Shropshire during the 1590s. Among records of the Shrewsbury sessions of the peace and gaol delivery for 1592 are a set of examinations taken before the two bailiffs of the town on 22 December, relating to a paternity dispute.² A bastard child had been born to one Joan Rider of Harlescott — a rural township two and a half miles north of Shrewsbury, lying within the liberties of the town. The bailiffs were concerned to establish the identity of the child's father so that a maintenance order could be issued, and the parish discharged of any financial obligations. One of the deponents, Thomas Tidder, a brickman from Shrewsbury, stated that Joan Rider had admitted to him that she was pregnant and that the father was a Thomas Swaine, 'and that he (Swaine) had maryed her before this tyme if his towe systers had not bin against hit'. Swaine himself denied this account, claiming that he had never had sexual intercourse with Joan Rider, '. . . but sayethe that he was a suter unto her in the waye of maryadge, which was partlye broken in lent last and yet afterwarde aboutes the tyme of conventrye fayre he was sent far thyther to speake with her, wheruppon he went thyther and beinge later in the night they laye bothe together in there clothes uppon a bed in the house but sayeth he never had to doe with her either at tyme or anye other tyme nor touche nor bare of her but with his handes and face'. Swaine was subsequently absolved from suspicion, as the mother had confessed the identity of the true father to the midwife at the birth.

Swaine's deposition mentions many of the features associated with bundling. The couple lay together in bed during the night while still wearing their clothes; sexual contact was limited to petting with hands and face; the occasion was linked to a pre-marital courtship, apparently permitting the couple to talk over certain mutual difficulties.

Stone suggested that bundling 'was a new practice which spread rapidly in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries because of the greater economic independence of young people afforded by the growth of cottage industry and because of a growing demand for affection and sexual attraction as a basis for marriage'.³ Alternatively, bundling may have had older roots — a view which the incident described in this note tends to support. However, readers of **LPS** may like to look out for additional examples which might clarify this matter.

NOTES

1. L. Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*, 1977, p. 607.
2. Shropshire Record Office, Shrewsbury Borough Records, 2208.
3. Stone, *ibid.*